

“UNACCOMPANIED ALIEN CHILDREN:
PRESSING THE ADMINISTRATION FOR A STRATEGY”

TESTIMONY OF
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Sires, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the United States strategy for engagement with Central America. I know many of you have been personally involved on this issue. The Administration welcomes the support and interest of this committee in our efforts to develop a humane and effective response to these migrants – unaccompanied children and families – arriving at our southwest border. Although we are encouraged that the numbers have decreased since July, we remain vigilant in our efforts to protect these children and address the underlying factors of violence and poverty in their countries of origin that are pushing them north.

More than sixty-five thousand unaccompanied children have left their homes to make the dangerous journey to the United States this year. From a foreign policy perspective, this migration is a warning sign that the serious and long-standing challenges in Central America are worsening. The course of action is clear. We must adequately address the underlying factors compelling so many to undertake this dangerous journey or be prepared for what is likely to be an ongoing cyclical phenomenon - with significant cost to the United States.

A stable, prosperous, and well-governed Central America is an important national security interest of the United States. Just last week, the Inter-American Development Bank hosted a conference on “Investing in Central America” where Vice President Biden and the Presidents from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras spoke about opportunities and challenges for growth and better

governance in Central America. We appreciate the IDB's role in bringing stakeholders together and offering to provide follow-up technical meetings.

Fortunately, we believe the essential condition for finding solutions is present: political will in the region. Central American leaders recognize the scope of the challenges they face at home and have begun to act. At the IDB conference, the presidents of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras publicly presented an unprecedented, coordinated plan – the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle. Their plan includes a clear-eyed assessment of the region's challenges, well-considered lines of action to resolve them, and specific priorities that they themselves will pursue. The plan addresses the underlying factors of migration and promotes a region of opportunity for all of its citizens, especially young people. The presidents' message at the conference was simple: the region's leaders know they have serious challenges and are prepared to make the tough choices to address them, but they need our assistance.

Their agreement to a joint plan is, in and of itself, an important demonstration of this political will, which we must now harness to cultivate, and where appropriate, expand the effective developmental and security partnerships that are in the U.S. national interest.

Without significant progress in Central America, the region will continue to face extreme violence, severe economic inequality and social exclusion, and widespread corruption and poverty, compelling many Central Americans to flee their homes each year. Others will embark on this journey to reunify with relatives and family members who are already residing in the United States or to enjoy higher quality of life in the United States. A secure, democratic, and prosperous Central American region will be a stronger partner for the United States and will provide an environment in which all of its citizens, including youth, find opportunities to build their lives at home.

Over the course of the past 18 months, the U.S. government has taken a hard look at both our approach and our investments. We determined that while security is still paramount, in order to succeed, we needed to broaden our vision. Consequently, we developed an interagency strategy that can support much of what the leaders of Central America put forward in their own coordinated plan. The U.S. Strategy for Engagement with Central America both aligns with and supports the objectives of the Alliance for Prosperity plan.

To achieve this vision, U.S. engagement with Central America must balance three objectives – prosperity, governance, and security. These goals are interrelated and interdependent.

Our **prosperity** agenda fosters integration of a regional market of 43 million people so that local businesses can become more competitive and the region can be more attractive to international investors. **Economic growth should reach everyone, not just the well-connected few.** Our efforts will promote better education and vocational training for all citizens including women and vulnerable ethnic groups, and create business environments that are friendly to entrepreneurs, and provide alternatives to the illicit activities that contribute to insecurity and undermine effective governance.

Our **governance** agenda recognizes that **economic growth is only sustainable when the rule of law and democratic institutions flourish, corruption and impunity is reduced, fundamental freedoms are respected, and civil society and the media can play their rightful roles.** In many Central American countries, citizens, businesses and governments face corruption, transnational crime, and political cronyism. In such an environment, governments often fail to provide the most basic services and protections. We know that the sustainability of U.S. efforts will be magnified if we focus on government effectiveness and accountability, and leverage our investments to demand honest leadership and a verifiable commitment to the rule of law from our partners in the region.

Without a doubt, **the security agenda will remain a core priority.** If we do not collectively and effectively address insecurity now – from neighborhood streets to transnational criminal networks in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the payoff from our other important investments will not bear fruit in the longer term.

Let me be clear. We are still a long way from achieving our core goals of sustained prosperity, good governance, and security in Central America. There is no greater indication of this fact than what we all witnessed this past summer: the willingness of tens of thousands of children to abandon their homes and travel up the isthmus and through Mexico to the United States – at substantial cost and amid the ever-present risk of rape, abuse, and death – to flee the dire conditions many face in their home communities.

Mr. Chairman, I can report that over the past few months, in partnership with Central American governments, we have achieved several important successes. Our coordinated public messaging campaigns informed families about the dangers of a migrant's journey effectively and countered false messages peddled by migrant smugglers. Increased focus on smuggling networks in Honduras and Guatemala by host country law enforcement, including U.S. trained and vetted teams, has led to arrests of smugglers and the rescue of over 235 children. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are all regularly receiving repatriation flights. The Government of Mexico has also been a vital partner.

While historical migration trends typically show a decrease in the number of migrants crossing the U.S. southern border during the hot summer months and in the fall, we believe that unprecedented efforts on the part of the Administration and our partners in Central America and Mexico bore meaningful results. The number of unaccompanied children apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border decreased from 10,628 in June to 2,514 in October – levels last seen in January 2013.

As interdiction and enforcement efforts ramp up, we remain conscious of the need to provide protection for children and other vulnerable migrants who need it—and this too is a central component of our efforts.

Our colleagues in the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration – or PRM – are working with international organizations, like the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to strengthen asylum systems in the region and find ways to protect children who are threatened or displaced in their own countries so they are not forced to flee. They support the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to help the region's governments manage migration and enforce border security in a humane way. At the direction of the White House, PRM has also worked with the Department of Homeland Security, US Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) to develop a new program that was announced by Vice President Biden in his remarks last week at the Inter-American Development Bank. This new program will allow parents lawfully present in the United States to petition for their children in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to come to the United States as refugees. Those children not eligible for refugee status will be considered on a case-by-case basis for humanitarian parole. Our aim is to offer a safe, legal, and orderly alternative to a child making the dangerous journey alone to the US border.

However, any progress cannot be sustained without an increased and re-engaged U.S. commitment to our long-term strategy in Central America. We assess that it could take \$5 billion over 5 years to fully implement this strategy. It is our intent to work with our regional partners who are going to put their own money and expertise into the effort, coordinate more effectively with international financial institutions, and promote private sector leadership in their efforts on this issue. Our own contributions will leverage these efforts and demonstrate American leadership and commitment to the region.

Despite serious and complex challenges, there is reason to be optimistic about Central America's future. As I mentioned, I believe the three leaders of the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are prepared to make hard decisions and to invest their own national budgets. Leaders in Panama and Costa Rica are demonstrating how the region can modernize and integrate to achieve better economic outcomes. Now is the time for a new U.S. approach to Central America that harnesses the region's political will for change and advances a strategy that balances and prioritizes prosperity, good governance, and security in equal measure. We have a vision, we have a plan, and we want to work with Congress to help Central America and protect U.S. national security.

Thank you and I welcome your questions.